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CAN INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM SURVIVE IN MODERN LIFE?

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This article gives a careful description of important social regulations of the caste system in India. Various influences in modern life are then considered in their effect on the system. The criticisms of Indian leaders of thought, the influence of education, the exigencies of trade and travel, and the political ambitions of the men of lower castes are compelling a reconsideration of the traditional prejudices.

At the time when the Aryans migrated from their homes in the northwest into India, there is no evidence of such a rigid stratification of society as characterizes the caste system. The Rigveda and Avesta both portray the life of the people of that age, and they give no indications of any divisions beyond the ordinary classes of priests, nobility, and peasantry. However, the migrations into a country already populated gave rise to a new line of social cleavage, namely, between the Aryan invaders who were white, tall, and cultured and the aborigines who were short, dark, and primitive. This division was expressed as *Aryas* or kinsmen and *Dasa* or friends, a word which subsequently came to mean slaves or servants. Again the classification was made on the basis of color (*varna*) because the aborigines were so much more black (*krishna*) than the invaders.

Toward the close of the period of the composition of the Rigvedic hymns, a hymn was introduced which indicates a classification on the basis of the original threefold Aryan division plus the aborigines. The classes were referred to as Brāhmans or priests, Kshatriyas, Rājanyas or nobles, Vaisyas or common people among the Aryans, and Sūdras or the conquered aborigines. In this passage the four classes are sharply defined and said to be created from parts of Purusha,

the creator. "The Brāhman was his mouth; the Kshatriya was made from his arms; the being called Vaisya, he was his thighs; the Sūdra sprang from his feet."¹ Yet even in this passage it is doubtful whether caste has yet begun. Evidently it was the beginning of that classification which later became so well defined and involved such rigorous exclusiveness of function. In the earlier times it was possible for a member of one class to become a member of another class, and there was also a great deal of intermarriage because the origin of certain subclasses is traced to such combinations.

In the Laws of Manu, we have another reference to the creation of classes, paralleling the Rigvedic pronouncement, references to the origin of certain sub-castes, and a delineation of the occupations and duties of the various castes. Manu gives his approval to Brāhmans and other caste men marrying, in addition to a first wife from their own castes, another from each of the lower castes. He then proceeds to illustrate by showing the resultant castes from intermarriages of this kind. In the code of Yajñavalkya it is laid down that the twice-born may have one wife from each of the first three classes, but they must not marry Sūdras. The castes of Aryan origin are known as twice-born, and Manu permits all of them to study the Veda, though the duty of teaching it belongs to the Brāhman only.

The Brāhmans are the priestly class and, by virtue of their origin from the mouth of Purusha, are above the others in authority and sanctity alike. The Brāhman (masculine) who aspires to union with the Brāhman (neuter) must faithfully perform the six works, study the Veda, sacrifice on his own behalf, make gifts, teach the Veda, sacrifice for others, and receive gifts. If a Brāhman is not able to obtain a livelihood within the regulations prescribed for his own caste, he has the alternatives of adopting the pursuits of the Kshatriya or Vaisya, or of becoming a mendicant. It is by means of the

¹ Rigveda, X, 90, 12.

mouth of the Brāhman that the gods are said to consume the sacrificial food, and that the spirits of the departed ancestors consume the offerings made to them. When a Brāhman is born there is a fresh incarnation of the divine law. His superiority is so profound that when one of another caste gives to him food or clothes, the giver is presenting to him that which is really his own, so that receiving a gift is equivalent to bestowing it upon himself. No matter what crime a Brāhman commits, he must never receive capital punishment, for the killing of a Brāhman is the most heinous of sins. His sin will bring about the divine order of punishment through the operation of *karma* and transmigration. For example the Brāhman who consumes intoxicants will be reborn as an insect, an unclean bird or as a destructive animal. And a Brāhman who neglects the duties assigned to his caste may look forward to rebirth as an evil spirit that lives on what others vomit. On the other hand, the Brāhman alone can hope for deliverance from *karma* and the eternal round of rebirths if he be faithful to his duties, for he alone has the true knowledge which is the basis of deliverance, realization that the *atman* (individual soul) is identical with the *Brāhman* (world-soul).

The Kshatriyas or Rājanyas are the second of the Aryan classes, originally the warriors or protectors of the people. The Law makes it incumbent upon them to protect the people, offer sacrifices and gifts, study the Vedas, and abstain from sensuality. Kings must be of the Kshatriya caste, and they are exempt from purificatory rites such as are required of ordinary Kshatriyas and members of other castes on occasions of ceremonial pollution. It is particularly meritorious for one of this caste to be slain in battle, and thereby he is considered as having performed a sufficient sacrifice. "The Kshatriya who dies fighting goes to heaven," says Manu. At the same time members of this caste are constantly reminded of their inferiority to the Brāhman, an inferiority evident both in origin and function. A Brāhman of ten years is to be con-

sidered as the father of a Kshatriya centenarian. If he comes to the house of a Brāhman, the Kshatriya may not be considered as a guest, and he is only permitted to eat after the Brāhman guests have all been fed. Ceremonial impurity demands a longer period for its removal in the case of the Kshatriya than a Brāhman. Moreover the prince who exhibits generosity in offering gifts to Brāhmins thereby acquires much merit, particularly if the Brāhmins be learned in the sacred lore. It is especially the prince's duty to attend to the physical requirements of Brāhmins, just as he would for his own sons, for nothing can bring to him prosperity comparable to the blessing of the Brāhman.

The Vaisyas were originally the farmers and artisans among the Aryan invaders, and were said, as we have seen, to have sprung from the thighs of the creator, Purusha. Like the Kshatriyas, they also were permitted to study but forbidden to teach the Vedas. The code of Manu prescribes their duties as caring for cattle, plowing the land, buying and selling, lending money, and offering sacrifice. The Vaisya and Kshatriya are enjoined to give alms, and promised that in so doing they will acquire merit equal to presenting their Brāhman teacher with a cow. When a judge is about to hear evidence in court, if the witness be a Brāhman, he need only say, "speak"; if it be a Kshatriya he must say, "speak the truth"; but if he is addressing a Vaisya he must warn him by dwelling on the guilt of stealing cattle, grain, or gold, or warn him of the danger of losing what he holds dear should he resort to perjury. Thus is the inferiority of the Vaisyas to both Brāhmins and Kshatriyas recognized. Just as a Brāhman in distress may follow the occupation of one of the two lower castes, and a Kshatriya of the Vaisya, so the Vaisya may take refuge in the manner of life of the Sūdra, but he is warned to get out of it as quickly as possible and to avoid all practices forbidden to his own caste. As in the case of the Brāhman, so with the Kshatriya and Vaisya,

unfaithfulness to the caste entails rebirth as an evil spirit which feeds on carrion and other filth. Of the twice-born, the Vaisya is essentially a servant, everywhere made conscious of his inferiority to the other Aryan castes, his one consolation being in his superiority to the subdued aborigines.

The Sūdras are the fourth or servile class in ancient Hindu society. They were the original inhabitants who were reduced to servitude by the Aryan invaders. In the *Institutes of Manu* they are contrasted with the Brāhmins, as being at the opposite pole of the social order. The Sūdra is declared to be unable to commit an offense involving loss of caste, to be unworthy to receive a sacrament, and unqualified to hear, learn, recite, or teach the Veda. The only occupation open to him is that of humble service to the three higher castes. A Sūdra, whether bought or unbought, may be compelled to serve a Brāhman. For a Brāhman to slay a Sūdra is but a minor offense, comparable to killing a flamingo, a crow, an owl, a lizard, or a dog. Should a Brāhman die with the food of a Sūdra in his stomach, he will be reborn as a village pig. If a Sūdra touch a Brāhman while eating, the latter must cease. On the other hand, if a Sūdra should insult one of the twice-born, his tongue may be cut out, and for many kinds of offenses to the higher castes, like debasing penalties are prescribed. Even the touch of a Sūdra to the corpse of one of the twice-born is regarded as polluting, and hindering the passage of the soul to heaven. A Sūdra's duty, first and last, is to be a servant. By serving a Brāhman he makes the best of both worlds. If he be pure, a faithful servant, gentle in speech, and humble, always seeking the protection of Brāhmins, he will be reborn in the next life in one of the higher castes. "The self-existent one created him to be the slave of the Brāhman. Even though his master sets him free, he is still a slave, a slave by nature and by birth."

The Hindu population of India includes, besides those who are ranked among the four main castes mentioned, fifty

millions of non-castes. It is evident from the ancient literature that these classes were not in existence in the early Hindu period. Their origin has been a matter of much conjecture and investigation. At the time of Aryan migrations, as we have already noted, the aborigines were assimilated into the social order. By the time the Laws of Manu were codified, we have reference to a class (the Chandāla) who were of mixed origin and were regarded as holding a definite place in the society below that of the Sūdras. The present out-caste communities include those despised servile peoples who occupy a position parallel to that assigned by Manu to the Chandālas, including the leather-workers of North and South India and the Pariahs of the South; and also those who have been expelled from the caste communities for breaches of Hindu social law. For example, intermarriage with one of the out-castes and acceptance of food from one of them are regarded as offenses against social regulations. These peoples are sometimes referred to as the Panchamas, or fifth class. They are of all people in India the least privileged, the most despised, their touch or even their shadow falling upon a man of high caste being considered a source of pollution. The regulations which determine the association of non-castes with the castes, the occasions of pollution, and the ceremonials of purification vary in different parts of the country.

It is well to remember that the word *caste* is inclined to be misleading, because it is not an Indian word. It originated from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning race or class, and began to be used by Portuguese sailors in the sixteenth century to describe the class divisions which seemed so curious to them. The Hindus use such other words as *varna* which means color, *jāti* which means birth or descent, *kula* which means family, and *gotra* which means race. It is only necessary to make the statement for one to appreciate the meanings of the Hindu concepts. Evidently the beginning of class divisions was purely functional, and the element of exclusiveness, carried

even to the point of hereditary distinctions and separations, is a matter of gradual evolution. Moreover, along with the hereditary rigidity there still persists the functional distinctions to a very large measure. The Brāhman fulfils the priestly and clerical offices. The Kshatriya is the prince. The Vaisya is the trader. The Sūdra is the laborer. And the various sub-castes among the Sūdra peoples are marked by occupations. Doubtless one of the reasons that the system has persisted throughout the centuries has been the measure of functional stability which it has accorded to Hindu society, permitting a wide range of differentiation and specialization without impairing the social fabric. By it the professions and trades have been assured of new recruits, because birth or descent predetermined the individual's occupation as well as his status. At the same time the religious basis given to the system has enabled the higher castes who enjoyed its advantages to perpetuate the differences, and even to gain the assent of those lower in the scale to the existing order. The profound belief of the whole people in *karma* and *samsāra* (metempsychosis) has undoubtedly been one of the sustaining foundations upon which popular assent has been built.

The great criticism of the caste system is that it is such a rigid organization that it does not permit enough free play and adjustment to the human factors. Its virtual motto is "Man was made for caste, and not caste for man." And when any organization becomes the master instead of the servant and instrument of humanity, it has ceased to serve its best usefulness. The very conservative tendency of caste is quite deadening to human initiative, and numbing to social progress. Its primary concern is the preservation of the established order rather than any effort at the improvement of human welfare. The only possibility of progress is within the caste, unless it be in the hope for rebirth higher up in the scale. On the other hand, there must be constant vigilance in the keeping of approved regulations, or regress to a lower status is inevitable

both in this life and in the next. Neither individual ability nor personal character count for anything. It is taken for granted that the accident of birth must be the sole determinant of occupation and of status. Personality is subordinated to system. Value is judged in terms of origin within rather than service to the community. Of course the limitations of the caste system work more hardship on the depressed classes, though the higher suffer to some extent. As Professor McDougall says, it deprives men of the potent motive, "the desire to rise in the social scale and to place one's children at a more advantageous starting point in the battle of life."¹

While it is quite true that caste still retains a grip upon the Hindu consciousness, yet indications are not wanting that the caste hold is in some small degree weakening. It is possible to indicate the movements that are at work in the direction of disintegration. The first of these influences is education. An educated man usually demands the right to enjoy the comradeship of other educated men, without respect to differences of birth. Moreover, he insists on freedom in the manner of choice of occupation, whether his choice happen to fall within the prescriptions of caste or not. The educated man declines to be bound by the orthodox regulations in regard to food. The old taboos have lost much of their hold. Even the old prohibition against caste men crossing the ocean or having to undergo *prayachitta* (a ceremony of atonement in which the subject has to partake of the five elements of the cow) on their return, is becoming a dead letter, and students who return from Europe and America, where they have quite disregarded caste, are received into Hindu society without prejudice.

But education is undermining caste not merely in the case of the educated, but also in the matter of treatment accorded to the less fortunately born. For education is inducing the spirit of social reformation and human brotherhood. Prohibi-

¹ *The Group Mind*, p. 289.

tions against certain foods, against interdining and against intermarriage are declared to be contrary to progress and humanity. Organizations such as the Depressed Classes' Mission are definite attempts on the part of the caste communities to extend the privileges of education to those to whom it is forbidden by the regulations of caste, and this is but one phase of the tendency to accord as well as to demand social justice for all alike.

A second influence that is working toward the corrosion of caste is the economic. India under the British Raj has become vitally a part of a larger world. Trade with Europe, America, and Japan has meant the introduction of commodities from these lands, enlarging the possibilities of the Indian market, and forcing competition upon some of the Indian industries. This has resulted on the one hand in a demand for broader economic opportunities than caste permits, and on the other hand in a necessity to choose other than caste-determined occupations through industrial rivalry. Even the Brāhman, with his inherited abhorrence of certain occupations of traditional pollution, will engage in the leather or any other business whereby he can be assured of a good income. Thus the old economic taboos are gradually but surely disappearing from the social consciousness. The expansion of transportation facilities within the past half-century has also stimulated the tendency toward disintegration. The railroad has on the one hand steadfastly refused to take cognizance of caste, and the low-caste man who pays for his ticket has the same right to a seat in any compartment where there is room as the high-caste man. On the other hand, this increase in transportation has made possible a great deal more movement among the people, and travel and new associations tend to break down conventions and to stimulate the spirit of freedom and adventure.

Another influence tending to undermine caste is the religious. The presence of Christianity has been more potent to

that end than Islam. Mohammedanism recognizes no caste, but has neither emphasized education nor human brotherhood, so that its centuries in India have had little effect on the caste system. But Christianity has at once spread the light of science and the doctrines of equality and fraternity. Unfortunately there is an occasional community of converts which perpetuates its pre-Christian class consciousness; but for the most part Christians from all communities freely mingle in a common brotherhood. Moreover, Christianity has accomplished what orthodox Hinduism claimed to be the impossible in the elevation of the depressed classes. One of the by-products of this influence is to be seen in the reforming movements within Hinduism which seek the material betterment and the enlightenment of the out-castes in the interests of revitalizing Hinduism, and redeeming India from her social injustices.

Today there is a growing movement in opposition to caste from the political angle. For the past quarter of a century India's political leaders have been holding before themselves and their fellow-countrymen the ideal of self-government. Increasingly these leaders of public opinion are expressing their conviction that political liberty cannot be attained without social liberty. Lala Rajpat Rai, the Punjabi leader, has declared caste to be "a disgrace to our humanity, our sense of justice, and our feeling of social affinity." Sir K. G. Gupta says that "the caste system had served useful purposes in the past, but it has not now a single redeeming feature." Dr. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet and prophet of internationalism, has said in frequently reported words:

This immutable and all-pervading system of caste has no doubt imposed a mechanical uniformity upon the people, but it has, at the same time, kept their different sections inflexibly and unalterably separate, with the consequent loss of all power of adaptation and readjustment to new conditions and forces. The regeneration of the Indian people, to my mind, directly and perhaps solely depends upon the removal of this condition of caste.

So there is a movement among the educated leaders in the direction of a direct repudiation of the old sanctions for the sake of a bigger, better India.

Still others are saying that the caste system must remain, but needs to be purged of its iniquitous features, and in the main of the doctrine of untouchability as applied to the out-castes. These men do not always define very clearly which features must go and which remain. Notably among the advocates of the inner reformation of the system is "Mahatma" M. K. Gandhi, the present leader of the Nationalist party. One of the insistent elements of Gandhi's program is the necessity of removing untouchability in the interests of attaining a solidarity, social and political. This is quite essential to the attainment and the maintenance of self-government. He further insists that social distinctions between Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Jews must give way, so that all the communities may make common cause the attainment of political liberty. In this effort Gandhi has a very influential following among Hindus and Mohammedans. The significance of this movement is far reaching. Never in her history has India attained so large a measure of national self-consciousness. And she is realizing in the person of her recognized leaders that one of the greatest barriers to the attainment of her national aspirations is this rigid social system. The long historical associations of the system with all that is Indian, and its religious associations with all that is Hindu make it very difficult indeed for the Hindu to declare himself against it. Such a declaration, more especially where it is seconded by practice, demands great moral courage and determination. But men of moral insight are beginning to realize that the issue is clear. They stand faced with the alternative of caste reformation or abolition and national progress on the one hand, and orthodox adherence to tradition and the stifling of a national *esprit de corps* on the other hand. For no nation that shackles its personality by

a system of social bondage can hope to achieve the possibilities of an unfettered life of progress.

There is another phase of the present political movement that is telling against caste. The progress of education has involved the training of a growing number of men from the lower castes who are able to take their places abreast of the Brāhman, and who resent the operation of any system which would rob them of the privileges they have earned. More especially from the great Sūdra communities a large number of such men have arisen, and the community of their interests has given them a group consciousness. Within the last decade this group mind has asserted itself in a definite political party, called the Non-Brāhman party. In South India the party has attained more strength than elsewhere as yet. It publishes a newspaper under the name *Justice* which is the medium of its platform. Sometimes it is known from the name of its organ as the Justice party. The avowed aim of the party is to put an end to the Brāhman ascendancy which has existed for centuries, and to place Non-Brāhmans instead of Brāhmans in office as rapidly as possible. Under the Reform Scheme which came into operation a year ago the Non-Brāhmans captured the majority of seats in the Madras Legislative Council, and the Council is led by Non-Brāhman ministers. Hitherto the Brāhman community, though only constituting about 3 per cent of the total population, has held 90 per cent of government positions. But the Non-Brāhmans have determined that this shall cease. Since they have come into power they are seeing to it that whenever possible vacancies that occur shall be filled with men of other than Brāhman castes. The success of the party in the Madras presidency is being watched and admired by other parts of India, and there are indications that it will spread as time passes. To be sure the movement is political rather than designedly social or religious. But the influence upon the social and religious life is unavoidable. Occasionally one hears of a Brāhman

priest being deposed, and a lower-caste man elevated to the priesthood. In the political arena, the Non-Brāhmans regard those of other religions as their allies. The continuation of the movement will in all likelihood involve much more far reaching effects than any yet realized. Many Brāhmans feel that they see "the handwriting on the wall," and are beginning to prepare themselves for an inevitable change in the social order in which their ascendancy will be a matter of history.

Yet we must be guarded against hasty conclusions. The caste system is still a vital force in Indian life. It is still the recognized social organization for orthodox Hinduism. It took centuries to evolve, it may take centuries to devolve. The reforming movements are very powerful in the larger cities, but scarcely noticeable in the smaller towns and villages which hold the masses of India's peoples. But the reformation has begun and is gaining in impetus. We may well believe that India's final judgment on the caste system lies with the future rather than with the past.